

The court of world opinion has accorded Mikhail Gorbachev a degree of individual responsibility for his nation's future perhaps not seen since the reign of the Sun King. Similarly, Mr. Gorbachev's persona may be blinding policy elites to the real course of events.

The Bush administration has spent the past several weeks wrestling with the question of Lithuanian sovereignty. There now is some prospect that the Lithuanians and Moscow will work out a compromise of sorts around the idea of "suspending" independence for two years. If this compromise is reached, it will be seen as validating the administration's desire not to do anything that would jeopardize Mr. Gorbachev and the reforms he

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represents. But what about the next Lithuania, or the Lithuania after that?

Just within the last 48 hours, the Latvian Popular Front said it had enough support to declare independence when its parliament convenes this Thursday, the first Soviet congress of free-trade unions met Monday in Siberia to declare its opposition to state unions, and the newly formed Ukrainian Republican Party said it would form the republic's first non-communist party with the intention of seceding. The West may have to turn out the Kohl-Mitterrand compromise as a form letter.

Perhaps it is time to consider the significance of these developments. Events are moving so rapidly in the Soviet Union that Mikhail Gorbachev, once a proponent of the policies favored by the West, may now be an obstacle to those policies. At the least, the U.S. ought to be committing itself to achieving a set of policies inside the Soviet Union, instead of committing to one man whether he follows those policies or not.

Mr. Gorbachev is a figure caught in a polarization between reformers and the old guard. For example, he recently gave a presidential cabinet appointment to Valentin Rasputin, who has ties to the intensely nationalistic Pamyat organization. In the event, Mr. Gorbachev isn't developing any real constituency in either group.

Why then, in this uncertain and fluid context, do we not support the people who favor the policies we want? And why do Western elites seem to be having such difficulty recognizing the powerful modern forces that are shaping and motivating these people? It is as if the reformers are

living in the age of telecommunications, while the politicians are living in the Age of Talleyrand.

Ever since the shipyard workers of Gdansk formed themselves into Solidarity, the words, actions and beliefs of democratic reformers in one part of the world have been transmitted via print, satellite feeds and fax machines to their counterparts elsewhere. We have seen Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel describe the democratic spirit before the U.S. Congress and a Statue of Liberty erected in Tiananmen Square. We have read of a Czech brewery worker leaping onto a factory table to recite Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and of Latin Americans braving death threats to cast a free vote.

The Lithuanians—as well as the Ukrainians in Lvov ready to sign economic agreements with Vilnius—see themselves as part of this same democratic force. Like it or not, the U.S. sits at the center of this maelstrom of courage and change as a moral anchor, an abiding symbol of what democracy is.

Yes, the practitioners of Realpolitik reply, but Mr. Gorbachev is the horse who is going to carry us to significant arms-control agreements, complete a Soviet troop pullout from Eastern Europe, allow Germany to unify, control still-dangerous Soviet hardliners, and create opportunities for the empire's real reformers. With so much headed our way, they say, why rock the boat?

The problem is that this forces us to deny repeatedly the damage real events are doing to our own political principles, such as the consent of the governed. We end up saying that everything's OK so long as Mr. Gorbachev doesn't use force, or too much force, while TV screens show him using force before our eyes. In an information age, how can the government supposedly supporting democracy publicly deny the obvious truth?

Do we believe that looking the other way while Mr. Gorbachev and the KGB's troops cut off Lithuania's economic lifelines will avoid civil war among a Soviet population that is a seething time bomb?

Do we really believe that any arms agreements he signs will bind his successors? Or that they have any real intention of stepping down from superpower status by abandoning modernization programs for their strategic forces?

Do we really believe that our forbearance will drive internal economic reform forward, even now as Mr. Gorbachev postpones it?

Realpolitik has its uses, but doesn't it have to pay some heed to the real world?